

Expert discusses the rising political tide of young adults, Gen Z

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"I think any place where Gen Z feels like others are marginalized, they'll show up," says John Della Volpe, whose book "Fight: How Gen Z is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America," chronicles the impact the country's youngest voter demographic is already having on U.S. politics. Credit: HKS

The expulsion of two Black state Democratic lawmakers in their 20s by

the predominantly white, Republican-controlled Tennessee House in late March ignited backlash across the country. Reps. Justin Jones and Justin Pearson were ousted for rallying in the House with local activists and student protesters in support of stricter gun controls following a school shooting in Nashville that left six dead. Both men were voted back into office last week.

What started as a modest gun-control protest outside the Tennessee state house erupted into a national cause after Jones and Pearson characterized their removal as an effort to silence Gen Z voices, disempower communities of color, and weaken democracy.

The incident is yet another example of the political potency of Generation Z, the 70 million young Americans born between 1997 and 2012 (aged 11–25). Since 2018, members of Gen Z have become politically engaged on issues like gun control, the environment, reproductive health, education, and racial justice, and, increasingly, running for office.

The Gazette spoke with John Della Volpe, director of polling for the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School. The IOP conducts the twice annual Harvard Youth Poll, a national survey of college-age Americans on political issues and trends. Results from the [Spring 2023 Harvard Youth Poll](#) on gun safety will be released April 24. Della Volpe's 2022 book "Fight: How Gen Z is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America," chronicled the impact the country's youngest voter demographic is already having on U.S. politics. Interview has been edited for clarity and length.

GAZETTE: How would you describe Gen Z socially and politically?

They are the most diverse, the most educated generation in American history. And like other cohorts of Americans who have seen their share of trauma and chaos in the country, this generation is unique in that they don't have a collective memory of America coming together or united. They don't have a memory of Sept. 11, nor Sept. 12, nor Sept. 13. So that's one thing that stands this generation apart from all generations since the Greatest Generation.

The second thing is, they've had this ongoing period of disquiet in their lives. From the Great Recession, the havoc that placed on so many American families—80% of families lost 20% of their wealth during the Great Recession—when they were young. Their earliest memories of school oftentimes [is] hiding under a desk for regular school shooter drills.

By the time they're in middle school and [high school](#), they're dealing with younger people in their community suffering from depression, opioid abuse. Sadly, we saw a significant increase in suicides once they turned into adolescents. Followed by the chaos in our politics, white nationalism through COVID.

So, this is a generation that's dealt with more trauma more quickly than any generation in 70 years. All that trauma happened before the oldest member of this generation turned 25, when neuroscience tells us that our brains are mature.

Once they turned 18 and got the right to vote, they had a kind of whiplash between President Obama and President Trump, [where they] can see the relevance of politics in their lives and the differences between the parties.

Of course, all that was supercharged on Feb. 14, 2018, when a shooter walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and, in the span of

six minutes, shattered a community forever. It was those students, two of whom are at Harvard now, who challenged themselves, their peers, and the rest of America to stand up and organize and try to fight back.

In that 2018 midterm, we saw roughly a doubling of participation relative to the average turnout in midterm election years in the last 30-something years. In most of those elections, between 15% and 20% of people in their teens and 20s participated in a midterm election. When Gen Z entered the arena in 2018, we saw participation in the mid-30s. More than two-thirds, as much as 70%, of young people in '18 voted for Democrats. And that trend of high levels of participation and high levels of support for Democrats has continued from '18 to '20 to '22.

GAZETTE: Aside from gun violence, what other issues are animating Gen Z most?

Overarching are concerns about [individual rights](#) and freedoms, defined as the right of a woman to control her [reproductive health](#); the right of all Americans to breathe clean air and clean water; the right of every child to be guaranteed a quality education; and the right of [younger people](#) to feel safe from school shootings and all Americans to feel safe in public spaces. Those are the top three or four issues animating young people.

GAZETTE: Gen Z and Millennials together will soon dominate the electorate. Where are they now and how do these groups compare politically?

Millennials and Gen Z will be roughly 40% of the electorate in '24.

These two generations travel together in terms of their political values, and the way in which they view the world government. Both generations

care about the same issues. They believe in a robust government to solve some of the systemic issues facing this nation.

The biggest difference is Gen Z has an urgency about their approach that Millennials lack. Millennials seem more comfortable working outside of the traditional systems, in nonprofits, and in their communities, to tackle the issues they care about. Whereas Gen Z seems committed to using all the tools in their civic toolbox—voting, running for office, as well as everything else that Millennials were doing. There's an urgency, almost a desperation in some cases, I'd say, when you talk to some of the more active members of Gen Z.

GAZETTE: The expulsion of Tennessee state Reps. Justin Jones and Justin Pearson by a white Republican supermajority ignited a fierce backlash nationally. Some, like Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, predicted the incident would only strengthen and "radicalize" young voters politically. Do you anticipate the conflict in Tennessee and young voter turnout that helped elect a Democratic justice to the Wisconsin state supreme court will further tighten Gen Z's embrace of its emerging political power?

I absolutely do. I wouldn't necessarily use AOC's word "radicalization," but I believe what we saw last week and what we're seeing is a generation who's not only voting in even-year federal elections, but they're now translating that enthusiasm and that passion into elections for statewide office, as well as a movement for those three things you talked about. I think what we're seeing now that Gen Z is able to show their political muscle virtually anywhere at any time.

GAZETTE: How do you anticipate that political muscle flexing to manifest itself?

I think in all the ways you'd expect, and that includes more young people running for office, and more young people participating in local politics, in state politics. So I'm watching what's happening in Florida carefully; I'm watching what's happening in Idaho, in Texas. That's where this movement could be extended to a local basis. Remember, up until the last year or so, a lot of the young Gen Z organizers were only able to organize on Zoom and on Slack and on text because of COVID. So we're just beginning to see what happens when a generation that has spent most of the time online uses more traditional grassroots organizing practices.

GAZETTE: You've said Gen Z was arguably the GOP's worst nightmare. What did you mean by that?

Gen Z are values-based voters motivated by a protection and expansion of basic rights—clean air, clean water, to feel safe in school, reproductive rights. They're concerned about those who are more vulnerable themselves, specifically members of the LGBTQ community. Basically, the protection of our democracy. Those are what I would call the table stakes. Unless members of Gen Z are engaging with individuals or parties who align with their sense of priorities or values, they're not going to get very far in terms of convincing them to support a cause or to vote for them. In the last two elections, at least 2020 and 2022, Republicans won the vote of everybody over the age of 45 handily. There was a "red wave" among voters over 45. It's the turnout, the participation, and the support for Democrats that blunted that. That's why they are the Republicans' worst nightmare.

GAZETTE: Surely, the GOP sees that the cultural and political issues they're rallying around are turning off Gen Z voters. Do you see any indication

that the party is trying to recalibrate any of their positions or messaging?

I don't. There's an article in The Hill where I made this exact point—these are values-based voters—and the Republicans [and] the author I talked to countered, "No, it's a messaging problem." Before you get to messaging, values need to align. The messenger has to be authentic and trustworthy, and then the message has to be clear and concise and persuasive. But the message doesn't matter if values aren't aligned, and the messenger isn't authentic.

GAZETTE: What's the best move for Democrats—sit back and just allow the Republicans to further alienate them? Or is there a way they can blow it with Gen Z?

Sitting back and focusing on other constituencies is the reason we had Donald Trump as president in 2016. You can never take this generation for granted. Every day, you have new members of Gen Z tuning into politics. They don't have a natural affinity for [political] parties or for Democrats. It's incumbent upon all parties to reach out and to listen and to work with members of this generation to show that they care. They're empathetic, and they've got solutions to the challenges they care about.

GAZETTE: Is 2024 the next big test for their strength as a voting bloc?

I think any place where Gen Z feels like others are marginalized, they'll show up. Wherever they feel vulnerable Americans are being taken advantage of, they'll show up. I didn't predict that they'd be showing up like they did in Nashville, but the Republican Party made it so. I don't

think we're gonna have to wait until 2024 to see the impact of Gen Z.

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